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Equatorial Guinea, Policy & Governance

Equatorial Guinea: The Pearl of Africa

In a continent plagued with drought and poverty, there seems to only be an oasis in desert mirages. However, this portrait is painted by the limited images of Africa that make their way into the United States: usually used as a tactic for raising funds. Nestled in the center of Africa, south of the Sahara, is an outlier to the resource drought. Equatorial Guinea is a phenomenal tropical environment with high agriculture potential, whose mines are teeming with untapped minerals, which gives it the nickname “Pearl of Africa”. Their GDP per capita is higher than Britain’s, and they receive no Western funding (Birrell para. 7). According to the numbers, Equatorial Guinea shouldn’t be another developing country. They shouldn’t have such poor health, employment opportunity, or education. Unlike many African nations, Equatorial Guinea doesn’t need to invent ways to feed their people or receive billions in funding to rebuild their nation; all of their potential is simply locked away like a pearl in a clam shell--just out of reach.

Falling in suit with real pearls, the country is tiny. Dwarfed by neighboring countries, Equatorial Guinea is smaller than the state of Maryland (CIA World Factbook). The population is distributed thinly as well, with only 778,358 citizens. There are only two cities that exceed 30,000 residents, and only five of the islands off the coast of the mainland are inhabited. The Guinean government presents itself as a republic, but it is internationally recognized as a brutal dictatorship (Countries and Their Cultures). The current President Teodoro Obiang is currently the longest serving leader in all of Africa. His son is also his Vice President, which has given him immunity to impending money laundering charges. All of the media inside his country is government owned, as well as the major corporations. The source of the money that Obiang’s elite regime sits on is profit from the oil industry. Obiang has attracted foreign oil companies to work in the country. Having large corporations should be a large work opportunity for the small population, but very few natives work in the industry. The majority of the population works in subsistence farming (making enough food to feed themselves and no more). The most popular crops are cassava, sweet potatoes, and bananas (Nations Encyclopedia para. 1). About 10.1% of the land is usable (or used) for agriculture, limited in part by the thick rainforests that cover around half of the land (CIA World Factbook). Only about 40.3% of the population lives in a city due to the lack of sustainable urban jobs.

All across Malabo, the country’s capital and largest city, lives the average Equatoguinean family. They have 4 children and live in old Spanish style dwellings. In the distance rests the government establishment; filled with picturesque mansions in front of the backdrop of the lush tropical forests, the city might seem at peace (Birrell para. 3). However, darkness looms in the typical home as only public violence is outlawed, so many women are victims of domestic abuse (Countries and Their Cultures). Their children are labelled mundane, and therefore cannot attend an elite school, nor can they afford the wealthy’s habit of going to school in Spain. More likely than not, two or more of the 4 children in the house won’t finish their elementary education—if they ever enrolled in school in the first place (Bekele para. 3). Their parents rarely make income; rather, they farm just enough to feed themselves, or work in

an industry job if they're lucky. The approximate income for the three-quarters of Equatoguineans that live under the poverty line is less than a dollar a day. The local water is horrendously unkept, and yet 66% of homes have electricity and 71% have cell phones(CIA World Factbook). The lack of commercial agriculture in the country leads daily meals to consist of homegrown cassava, bananas, rice, and yams. On occasion, the family might hunt or fish, and celebrate with chicken or duck.

Corruption in the government has caused all of the hardship in the country. The thriving economy in the nation is completely disconnected from the citizens. The government sits on billions of dollars brought in by foreign oil companies which, as stated before, should bring massive amounts of employment to the country (Bekele para. 12). The government blocks this from happening by not investing in education. This might seem like a thin tie to the lack of economic activity, but the oil jobs available are reserved for specially trained operators who are much more educated in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field than the average citizen. Rather than balancing a budget to include better support for the education system, the regime pockets the extra profit they receive from hiring foreign laborers. This leads to massive scandals, such as Obiang's son, who was cited by the French government as having lavish mansions and hidden pockets of money in Spain and the United States (Human Rights Watch para. 16, 18-19). At the time, he was the head of the agricultural department, but was promoted in order to block the French government's charges and obtain the immunity that comes with his Vice President title (Human Rights Watch para. 4).

The lack of regard for the lives of Equatoguineans is shown repeatedly in the ways that the government does spend infrastructure improvement money. In order to present their country as an economic pioneer in the Eastern world, the regime built a virtual village of their own—although it presides as a modern day ghost town in the absence of foreign dignitaries. Fifty-two mansions sit neatly in line, all empty. A brand-new, fully updated hospital stocked with medical supplies and doctors sits nearby. No ordinary citizens are admitted as patients, as only the elite can enter, so the doctors sit idly in their respective rooms (Birrell para. 7). In the rest of the country, there are almost no restaurants or modern convenience facilities, nor is there quality health care. Any shred of modern day luxury presides in the upper class's inner circle. The neglect of the ordinary citizen is so prevalent that only 2% of the government's budget is given to health, and 3% to education (Bekele para. 9). This has led Equatorial Guinea to have one of the lowest vaccination rates in the world, as well as rampant disease amongst the poor (Bekele para. 2).

Due to the regime's complete neglect of their people, the citizens themselves aren't united to support their country. The official languages of Equatorial Guinea are Spanish and French, although French is in an extreme minority. Under the surface, most of the citizens speak their tribal language as a first language, commonly followed by their second language of Spanish. Citizens tend to identify themselves as a member of their tribe ahead of their citizenship to the country. It is common for these tribes to fight, and the Fang tribe (the largest) tends to discriminate against immigrants and non-Fang citizens (Countries and Their Cultures). The overall attitude of the population is one of submission towards the regime, as opposition often leads to jail in the infamous Black Beach prison. Due process doesn't exist in Equatorial Guinea, so political prisoners are frequently beaten (Countries and Their Cultures). Within the government, only one representative is from the opposing party, and he has been sent to prison many times (Birrell para. 52). Only one coup was attempted by the people decades ago, and it failed (Birrell para. 1). The lack of unity in the government and people has led to the stagnant humanitarian conditions in the nation.

The deep-rooted troubles of the government has manifested itself as a decline in their prized economy. The overall production of oil has been on the decline as a result of the over-tapping of wells (African Development Bank Group para. 1). The known natural oil reserves are being drained quickly. The economy relies heavily on the oil industry due to the gross under-investing of the government in agriculture. Equatorial Guinea's fertile tropical environment has the potential to support the economy with export crops like coffee. However, the government's intense focus on their present cash grab will inevitably leave the citizens with even less than they already have, while the regime continues on, unscathed and living off hidden pools of millions of dollars.

On the world stage today, there are efforts to combat the corruption in Equatorial Guinea. Although, it is difficult to handle these issues without active help and recognition of the problems from the government and people. Stated before, France is currently attempting to prosecute Vice President Teodorin Obiang for his massive amounts of money laundering. This is a step towards revealing the flaws of their governance and drawing international attention. On the other hand, Teodorin now has immunity from these charges. The regime has also disputed these charges to their people by demonizing the outside world—a very unnerving direction for their society to move towards (Birrell para. 19-20).

Western funding has been completely cut, further validating Obiang's presentation of his country as an economic pioneer in Africa. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank have withdrawn their funding in recognition of the country's great wealth, while the United States has cited the country's severe human trafficking as reason to not help them (CIA World Factbook). While the U.S. might perceive lack of support as some form of punishment until conditions improve, this plan fails to recognize the fact that the elite don't need foreign aid when they have oil giants, and therefore face no repercussions from the withdrawal of Western cash flows. Overall, the essence of these approaches is to show a lack of tolerance for the corruption and trafficking in the nation, but more active approaches are the key to solving these problems for good.

Equatorial Guinea doesn't stand alone in the fight against broken government, but they aren't putting forth effort into correcting their faults. As an example, Kenya attended the Anti-Corruption Summit to show their motivation to make changes. They pledged to host an African Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Coordination Centre and improve the government's transparency (Transparency International). By attending the summit and making such pledges, they opened themselves to international critique and accountability. Rather than focusing on profits, they are attempting to make Kenya a more open, successful country in the long term. The only global shortcoming with this approach is that attending the summits and conventions for anti-corruption are completely voluntary. This has led to the abandonment or inactivity of pledges made. According to Transparency International's Anti-Corruption Pledge Tracker, 54% of Kenya's commitments are not being worked on currently. The governance's openness to change is still a large part of the shifts that must occur in Equatorial Guinea, despite the obvious pitfalls of that Kenya is experiencing.

The real working solution to Equatorial Guinea's problems could be as quick and painless as flicking a light switch, or their sudden economic fortune from the oil boom. Although, more likely than not, it will be a slow prying open of the tightly sealed elitist circle. The first and most crucial step is to limit

presidential power with appropriate checks and balances. As it stands, President Obiang has his government stocked with his allies and easily manipulated politicians. He has a constitution that supposedly controls him, but there has been a trend of amendments to the constitution to suit his needs (CIA World Factbook).

After President Obiang's power has been reduced (likely with the addition of two or more branches of government), the rest of the solutions fall into place quite logically. More money would be allocated to health and education to distribute the wealth to the people. There would also be a substantial investment into the agriculture industry. This would provide immediate, accessible jobs to the current working class, as well as stabilizing the economy for the foreseeable future. These actions would be taken alongside the current efforts to prosecute those in power that are enriching themselves from illegal activities. Equatorial Guinea should also partake in Anti-Corruption counsels to reaffirm their efforts, add much needed transparency, and rebuild their reputation.

These efforts would be led by the United Nations. The United Nations, while technically having no substantial power to discipline or control a country, is the manifestation of the "world stage" so often referenced in international affairs. The United Nations has, so far, been very tolerant of Equatorial Guinea. Equatorial Guinea has petitioned for and won a non-permanent Security Council seat, developed an agreement to improve food security, and joined 185 other countries in signing the Convention Against Corruption (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime). The food security agreement is vague and aimed towards urban development, and the corruption convention relies heavily on States performing self-discipline when acts of corruption occur. These current dealings of the UN leave too much leeway. Seen as one of the largest voices and most reputation-defining international organization, the UN has the responsibility to push Equatorial Guinea towards a more transparent future. President Obiang places his priorities in the reputation of his country, as seen by his focus on infrastructure and achieving the approval of Western powers. The key to the success of such advocacy against the government is the persistence and action of the world's leading humanitarian organizations. The United Nations should make strict demands and a plan of action for Equatorial Guinea, or risk punishment from the counsel.

An obstacle in the ground-level work in Equatorial Guinea is the lack of freedom in the country. There are currently no human-rights organizations in the country. Any meeting involving a party greater than five people requires a federal permit, which ensures that any non-profit organization will be co-operated by the government, and only be involved in health or educational advocacy (Allison para. 12). UNICEF has a campaign in the country, one of a few involved international health organizations, but it is based around increasing vaccinations and sex-education in the media.

There are organizations outside of the country that are helping to start social movements against the government. Equatorial Guinea Justice was founded by native Equatoguineans who had to flee the country. The organization keeps up-to-date articles available, begins petitions against corruption, and supports artists (political cartoonists, songwriters, etc.). Transparency International has also been actively involved in the war on corruption. They too support the free flow of news and petitions. However, Transparency International is a much more powerful force that is responsible for introducing and progressing the prosecution of Vice President Obiang. Both of these organizations should turn their sights on the UN and Western governments to pressure denunciation of President Obiang and his regime. EG

Justice should move forward with motivating the youth to be informed and change the social mindset from one of division and oppression to one of unity and determination. The attitude of the people is one thing that the government cannot control, and it will lay the groundwork for the spirit of a new Equatorial Guinea.

The rebuilding of a country post-dictatorial rule is never a smooth journey. It will require the involvement of international organizations and leadership. Even though the World Bank doesn't fund middle-class countries, they could offer their services by designing an appropriate economic plan. Due to the regime's extended negligence of the agriculture industry, investment in commercial agriculture would bring the citizens more immediate security in food and income. Once the money begins to reach the people, the rest of the country will slowly begin to look more like the ultra-modern, elitist's village. This will require intensive progress tracking to ensure a whole new set of fair work standards and anti-discrimination efforts in the rather divided country. The boom of urban development has already begun in the country, and wealth distribution will continue to expand the movement.

All of the infrastructure expenditures wouldn't need to be paid for by any of these organizations, either. The money recovered from the stolen assets and laundered money would be able to cover the costs. The efforts also help to combat a completely different realm of problems: environmental. The country is currently fueled by fossil fuels and hydropower (CIA World Factbook). Decreasing dependency on oil will inevitably lead to the slow decline of fossil fuel power. This can be replaced with other resources, such as their hydropower industry, newfound biofuel in their promising agriculture department, or even solar. Being a relatively undeveloped country, instituting strict green-building codes could promote the normalization of solar power. There are many up-and-coming technologies that easily incorporate solar into modernized buildings. These codes would also require strong insulation in exterior walls measures to prevent the pitfalls of first-world energy waste.

The potential packed in this tiny country has the capability to bring hope to a struggling continent, and even outperform Western counterparts. With only the thin barricade of corruption between Equatorial Guinea and success, international attention is just the push that the country needs. Checking the power of the President and implementing more process-oriented economic policies will cause a ripple effect in the nation. Freeing the people of the burden of poverty will allow the country to flourish with a new presence in agriculture and more accessible healthcare. Future generations will be more encouraged to complete school so that they can tap into the plethora of job opportunities available. Once Equatorial Guinea recovers, they can become the leader in Africa that President Obiang always claimed them to be, and finally live up to their name: the Pearl of Africa.

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